



## Mid-Maryland Internal Medicine

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## Driving Older/Driving Smarter

The ability to drive means the ability to be independent, so admitting that any of our driving skills diminish as we get older is difficult. But the fact is that many things change as we age that impact the ability to be a good driver. This includes slower reaction time, limited vision and reduced range of motion. Chronic conditions like arthritis, diabetes and other physical limitations can affect drivers' ability to safely navigate in traffic. Car accidents tend to have more significant consequences for older drivers who are less able to recover from injuries. At the same time, even Frederick driving has become more challenging as we increasingly suffer from the types of congestion, aggressive drivers and rush hour traffic that we used to say only occurred in bigger cities.

But don't put down your keys just yet. Plenty of older adults continue to drive safely, and that includes many who have significant health issues or physical limitations. The goal is to recognize and understand those limitations and make any necessary adjustments to stay safe behind the wheel.

By paying attention to the changes that normally come as part of the aging process, you can take steps now to improve or optimize your driving skills and strategies to stay safely behind the wheel for many years to come.

### Key Points

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- Everyone's driving skills diminish with age. It's important to be aware of changes and take steps to maintain safety behind the wheel.
- Free, private online assessments can be a good first step in helping you decide whether you should pursue an in-depth, personalized evaluation.
- Inexpensive driving-safety courses for seniors are sponsored by both AAA and AARP. Completing a course will not only help you drive more safely, but may also qualify you for a discount on your car insurance.
- There are plenty of things you can do on your own to stay safer while driving, like exercising, limiting driving to daylight hours, avoiding in-car distractions and increasing the distance behind you and the car ahead of you.
- If you or a member of your family is facing the prospect of giving up driving altogether, plan well and start the discussions early. Seniors who give up driving without having other transportation options in place can experience isolation, depression and poor health outcomes generally.

Learn  
More



[SeniorDriving.AAA.com](http://SeniorDriving.AAA.com)  
offers a wide range of  
materials to support aging  
drivers including self-  
assessments and advice.

## Assessing Your Driving Ability

There are plenty of ways to assess your driving ability, both on your own and with the assistance of a professional.

### ➤ Self-Assessment

#### [AAA Interactive Driving Evaluation](#)

A confidential self-evaluation program features a series of computer-based exercises that can be completed in 30 to 45 minutes and help you identify steps to reduce driving risks in eight key areas.

#### [University of Michigan Driving Decisions Workbook](#)

A printable document created by the Transportation Research Institute that steps drivers through questions and suggests next steps based on answers.

#### [AAA Drivers 65 Plus Performance Check](#)

This printable document lets you assess your behavior on the road and provides suggestions to increase safety behind the wheel.

### ➤ Professional Assessment

You can also get a personalized driving assessment from a specially-trained occupational therapist. These professionals have special training in driving evaluation and most are certified by the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (AOTA). There are a number of driving assessment and rehabilitation facilities within easy driving distance of Frederick. The Maryland MVA also maintains a [list of driving rehabilitation specialists](#) who also perform evaluations.

A professional evaluation may include any or all of the following:

- Clinical evaluation
  - Medical history review
  - Vision check
  - Cognition tests (memory, judgment, response speed)
  - Motor function
- Road test
  - How you handle the car
  - Your problem-solving ability and judgment
  - How well you negotiate traffic

Before you commit to getting an assessment from an occupational therapist, make sure you are comfortable with them. If you're not sure what questions to ask, [use this printable checklist](#).

## Heed Warning Signs

It's important to pay attention to warning signs. This list, from the AARP, are indications that it may be time to either get a driving assessment or think about limiting your driving:

- Almost crashing, with frequent "close calls"
- Finding dents and scrapes on the car, on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, curbs, etc.
- Getting lost, especially in familiar locations
- Having trouble seeing or following traffic signals, road signs, and pavement markings
- Responding more slowly to unexpected situations, or having trouble moving their foot from the gas to the brake pedal; confusing the two pedals
- Misjudging gaps in traffic at intersections and on highway entrance and exit ramps
- Experiencing road rage or causing other drivers to honk or complain
- Easily becoming distracted or having difficulty concentrating while driving
- Having a hard time turning around to check the rear view while backing up or changing lanes
- Receiving multiple traffic tickets or warnings from law enforcement officers

## Steps to Take

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Time to take action? There are plenty of things you can do to minimize the chances of having driving problems. They include:

### ➤ Courses

#### [AARP Smart Driver Course](#)

The AARP conducts regular Driver Safety courses at Frederick Community College. It covers defensive driving techniques, the latest rules of the road and how to manage and accommodate age-related changes in vision, hearing and reaction time. Taking the course may even qualify you for a car insurance discount. You can learn more by going to the AARP website or calling (877) 846-3299.

#### [AAA Defensive Driving Course](#)

Many AAA branches offer driving courses for seniors. Check with your local AAA office or call (800) 222-4357 to see if a course is offered near you.

### ➤ Habits

Some simple adjustments to your lifestyle and driving habits can keep you safer:

- Exercise regularly to increase strength and flexibility.
- Ask Dr. Pierce or Dr. Afrookteh to review all your medicines—both prescription and over-the-counter—to reduce side effects and interactions.

- Have your eyes checked by an eye doctor at least once a year. Wear glasses and corrective lenses as required.
- Restrict your driving to daylight hours and in good weather.
- Find the safest route with well-lit streets, intersections with left turn arrows, and easy parking.
- Plan your route before you drive.
- Leave a large following distance behind the car in front of you.
- Avoid distractions in your car, such as listening to a loud radio and eating. And don't forget that in Maryland, using a cell phone while driving is both unsafe and illegal.

## If You Have to Stop Driving

At some point, almost every driver has to turn in their keys and let others do the driving. According to Dr. Emily Betz, an emergency medicine specialist who does research on the safety of older drivers, "It's sort of the elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about, but it's an issue that's coming for most of us and our family members and so denial isn't probably the most helpful option." If you see that day coming for a spouse, a family member or yourself, start talking about it now.

In a wonderful radio piece on the topic called *It's Never Too Soon to Plan Your Driving Retirement*, aired by National Public Radio on November 9, a 94 year-old who stopped driving four years ago explained "It's no fun when you give up driving. I just have to say that. But I think it's just better to make up your own mind than have your kids go through trying to tell you, and end up with arguments and threats and everyone gets mad."

If you're facing the decision to stop driving, don't go cold turkey. Make sure you have friends, family or other transportation support. Think through where you have to go on a regular basis and what arrangements you can make for rides. Some options might include carpooling, local support organizations, public transportation or other special services. And keep in mind that starting to use public transportation at a later age can be intimidating. At first, have a family member accompany you on trips using these services so that you can get accustomed to them before you go solo.

**Listen  
Now**



[It's Never Too Soon to Plan Your Driving Retirement](#)  
aired on National Public  
Radio on November 9,  
2015.